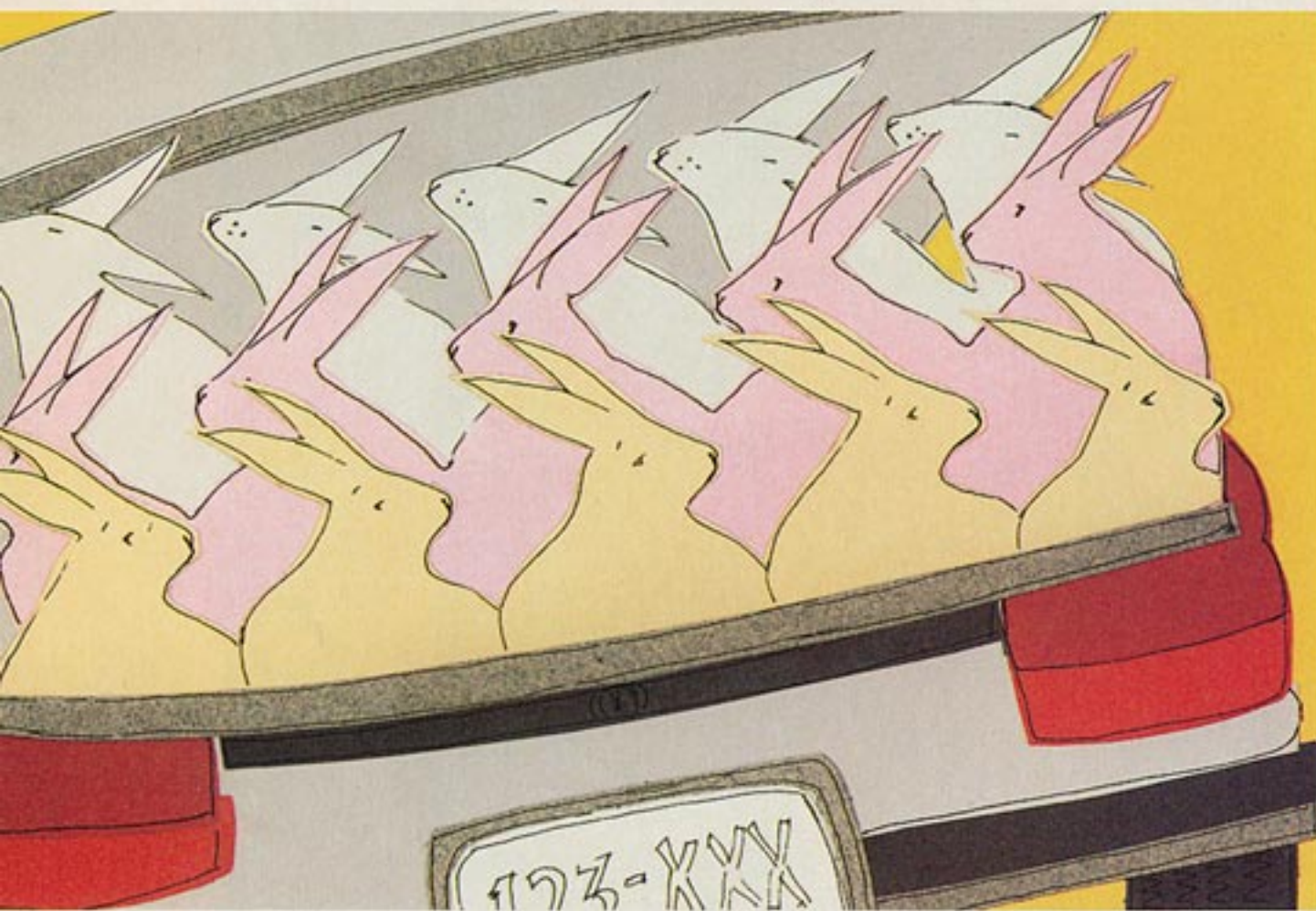


# The Magician With the MBA

By Denise Abbott



**W**hen Chevrolet's Dave Klem recently introduced the new Lumina and Geo products to his company's independent dealers and sales representatives, he sensed he needed more than a panel of experts and a slide show to convince everyone that the cars were winners. So Klem, marketing manager for the Philadelphia branch of Chevrolet, hired William Herz for a few pointers. When the curtain at the presentation went up, Klem walked out and began to talk about how much money could be made with the new products. He snapped his fingers in front of a clear, glass box, and the box filled up with currency. He then went on to illustrate the advantages of the new models

displayed on stage—their roomy storage space, for instance. He opened the empty trunk and, poof, it filled up with bunny rabbits. The audience applauded wildly, and Klem knew he'd made his point.

"These meetings are normally deadly dry and serious," says Klem. "Magic takes away the predictability. It played great with our salespeople because it showed 'em these Chevrolet guys could be innovative, thanks to Bill."

A New York magician with a master's degree in business administration, Herz makes his living teaching magic to corporate executives. No, he can't turn a net loss into a gain, but he can do a lot of other things to help businesspeople enliven

their routine corporate appearances and motivate audiences. He can show a chairman of the board an ESP trick, thereby impressing anyone who doubts the boss's omnipotent wisdom. He can teach vice presidents how to escape from thumb cuffs, proving that no obstacles are too great to overcome. Or he can illustrate a product's growth potential by transforming a doll into a life-size figure.

"This is not magic for the sake of magic," says 34-year-old Herz, whose fees range from \$1,000 to \$5,000 for a few simple tricks to as high as \$50,000 for an entire production with major illusions. "It's magic to communicate a message. Companies need to be able to communicate creatively. They can't just

**William Herz makes his living teaching magic to nationally known corporate executives.**

say, 'OK, guys, let's get out there and sell.' Magic not only helps executives be the star of the meeting, it also humanizes them."

Steve Soloman of Fuji Photo Film USA Inc. was initially reluctant to hire Herz. "I've seen magicians at trade shows before, and I felt they added a circus atmosphere," he explains. "But because Bill has a degree in marketing, he understood what our objectives were and knew how to meet them. He never forgot he was working for a company that was selling a product and had him there for a reason."

Last February, Charles Berman, a divisional partner of real-estate giant Trammell Crow Company, held a meeting to mark the two-year anniversary of his Connecticut office. The office had grown from two to 40 people in a matter of 15 months, and Berman wanted to stress the importance of office communication: "I'll make my point right now. Pick a number from one to 52, write it down on a piece of paper and pass it around the room, but don't let me see it." After a colorful routine he'd rehearsed with Herz, Berman announced the correct number. "There was a stunned silence," he recalls. "They couldn't believe it. Everyone accused my secretary of telling me the number. So I had to go through the trick again without anyone showing the number to her."

"That's the thing about magic," Herz says enthusiastically. "It's the only entertainment medium that's interactive. It gets people involved." Herz should know. He's been doing tricks since he got a magic set for his 10th birthday: "I was always small as a kid, and magic got me attention." He went on to work as a Fuller Brush salesman and an entertainment booker for Club Med, but he says he never outgrew the magic-kit stage. So in 1982, he began "knocking on doors" in the business world and performing magic at corporate functions and trade shows.

He literally stumbled upon the idea of teaching magic to executives when, in 1987, he performed at a corporate banquet in London. After the show, an enthusiastic executive asked Herz to teach him a few tricks for the next meeting. The executive was a hit, and Magicorp was born. In the two years

since, Herz's strictly word-of-mouth business has grown to include executives from AT&T, Citicorp, General Foods, Shell Oil, General Mills, IBM, Condé Nast, and more. According to Herz, Magicorp's gross income has jumped from \$98,000 the first year to an anticipated \$500,000 in 1989. He spends three or four days a week on the road, and has performed in Europe, India, China, Mexico, and all over the United States. "I'm so engrossed in my work, it's scary," he admits. Even off duty, his favorite pastime is developing new tricks.

As far as Herz is concerned, magic is child's play. "The brighter the audience, the easier they are to fool," he confides gleefully. "IBM—those guys are cake. Lawyers and scientists are easy because they're trained to think in a linear and methodical way. They're used to going from A to B to C to D. I go from A to D and they go nuts. They love it. They're busy looking for the sophisticated answer, but in magic it's always the easy answer."

Upon being hired by a company, Herz meets with the principals to learn all he can about their objectives at the upcoming meeting. "Sometimes a company is vague about what their message really is," he says. "I help them pin down the focus, and establish three or four key points to get across." He reads their speeches, and then invents tricks and provides props to highlight those points.

Herz says he's never been stumped; however, some projects are tougher than others, and some he's actually turned down. There's a delicate balance, he says, between coming up with entertaining tricks that illustrate a point and stealing the show: "The last thing you want to do is produce a lion, because everyone would be wondering where the lion came from instead of thinking about the content of the meeting."

Teaching magic to wary executives is a challenge in itself. Some feel they're above doing tricks. "Those who think, 'Oh, that's silly. I wouldn't dream of doing magic—I'm a CEO' are the ones who need it desperately," says Herz. Businessmen, he continues, are inevitably afraid of making fools of themselves: "They need to be convinced they won't blow it. My tricks are foolproof; I take no

chances." Learning a 60-second trick requires only about 10 minutes of training, he says, but then the client must practice "just as he'd practice his speech." Herz's students are asked to take a magician's oath of secrecy, promising not to give away the trick. "What they're learning is what professionals make a living with. Some magicians get upset," he admits. "But my feeling is that learning one trick doesn't make you a magician."

Randy Chorney of *USA Today* hired Herz for this year's national circulation sales meeting. She says the 10 tricks Herz taught the company's top executives looked difficult but were surprisingly simple: "When he first did the tricks, we thought they were fantastic and that no one would ever be able to figure them out. Our executives were afraid because they looked so hard. But when he showed us how they were done, we all had the same reaction—'That won't fool anyone.' They were so simple we felt like idiots for not figuring them out in the first place."

"Everyone's upset when they see how easy the tricks are," Herz concurs. "There's a wee bit of disappointment in finding out how they're done because, when it comes right down to it, these heavy hitters are just kids at heart. Frequently, someone will learn a trick quickly and ask if he can have another one to close his speech. I usually don't give him one. I have to remind the person that this isn't a magic show—it's a meeting."

For *USA Today*, Herz created an invitation that, upon being opened, burst into a flower. "It really set the tone for the entire event," says Chorney. He also provided each guest with a personalized shopping bag filled with magic tricks and instructions on how to use them. "We created a lot of magicians around here," says Chorney with a laugh. "People left saying it was the best meeting in the history of Gannett. They're *still* talking about it. But now I've got a new problem," she adds. "How am I ever going to top this next year?" □

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